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Taking Swings at a Myth, With John Henry the Man

By [WILLIAM GRIMES](#)

STEEL DRIVIN' MAN

John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend

By Scott Reynolds Nelson

In the American mythic pantheon, John Henry stands right at the top, alongside Paul Bunyan and Pecos Bill. Virtually every schoolchild knows the tale, transmitted through song, story or animated cartoon, about the doomed railroad worker who bests a mechanical drill only to die at the moment of victory.

In "Steel Drivin' Man," Scott Reynolds Nelson argues that the John Henry story was no tall tale, and Henry himself no myth. Historians have long speculated that the John Henry ballads, which began circulating in the 1870's, referred to a real railroad worker, but Mr. Nelson, with extensive documentation in hand, proposes a candidate. His John Henry is a former Union soldier, imprisoned for theft while on a work assignment in Richmond, Va., and leased out with other inmates to blast tunnels through the Allegheny Mountains for the new Chesapeake & Ohio Railway.

Do the facts add up? Maybe. Mr. Nelson, an associate professor of history at the College of William and Mary, stumbled on his evidence while writing "Iron Confederacies," a study of Southern railroads during Reconstruction. In the early 1870's, he found, large numbers of convicts from the Virginia State Penitentiary died while working on the C&O Railway. Recalling a version of the John Henry ballad with the lines, "They took John Henry to the white house, and buried him in the san'," he made a connection: the main building of the penitentiary was white. Nearby, in 1992, workers demolishing the prison had dug up about 300 skeletons. Mr. Nelson ransacked state archives and came up with the name of a prisoner: John William Henry.

The historical record is sketchy, but most of the verifiable facts about Mr. Nelson's John Henry make him plausible as the real steel-driving man. First, of course, is the name. In addition, Henry worked on the team assigned to drill the Lewis Tunnel in West Virginia, where steam drills were put to the test against workers with hammers. By 1874 he has disappeared from prison records, with no mention of pardon, parole or release, strongly suggesting that he died while working on the railroads and not inside the prison, where his death would have been recorded.

So who was John Henry? Mr. Nelson can do no more than offer a tantalizingly incomplete biography. He was from New Jersey and, in some capacity, worked for the Union Army at City Point, a landing near Petersburg, Va., in 1866, when he was 18. In April of that year he was arrested for stealing from a grocery store and sentenced to 10 years in prison. He was sent to the Virginia State Penitentiary, where the warden, desperate to raise revenue, had begun leasing prisoners to the railroad for 25 cents a day. John Henry was one.

Mr. Nelson's railroad expertise serves him well. He explains in detail what tunnel drilling involved, both for manual workers with hammer and chisel and for the new steam drills that promised a cheaper, quicker way to bore the holes that workers filled with blasting material. The hammer man worked in partnership with a shaker, who would hold a chisel-like drill against mountain rock, while the hammer man struck a powerful blow with a sledgehammer. Then the shaker would begin rocking and rolling: wiggling and rotating the drill to optimize its bite. Work songs like the early John Henry ballads, often rhythmic chants with no melody, set the pace and synchronized the movements of hammer man and shaker.

As Mr. Nelson tells it, the contest between worker and machine was less than equal. A smoothly coordinated human team had an advantage over the early drills, which constantly broke down. The machines were highly efficient, however, at generating clouds of silicon dust. Contrary to the picture presented by the ballads, John Henry would have died not of exhaustion or a burst heart, but of silicosis, a fatal, fast-moving lung disease that took the lives of hundreds of railroad workers.

How John Henry, a small man even for the time, became the muscled superman of legend remains mysterious. After carefully laying out the historical record and recreating, in the book's most absorbing chapters, the world of the railroad

workers, Mr. Nelson simply takes his leave of John William Henry, without comment. The rest of the book recounts the history of the John Henry ballads, and their hero's transformation from man to myth. Mr. Nelson tells this part of the story mechanically, and often repetitively, with annoying first-person digressions.

There is a John Henry for every constituency. White Southern millworkers, listening to country recordings of the ballads that never mentioned Henry's race, assumed he was a white man whose plight resembled their own. Any worker facing the new world of mechanized labor understood the John Henry story. For coal miners he was a miner; for railroad workers he was a trackman; for Communist organizers he was "the hero of the greatest proletarian epic ever created."

Civil rights workers saw him as an emblem of black oppression and defiance. Mr. Nelson even argues, rather unconvincingly, that John Henry's powerful physique served as the model for comic-book superheroes like Captain America.

What Mr. Nelson proves is the undying power of the John Henry myth, which reduces almost to a pinpoint the historical figure he resurrects from the archives. Whether or not John William Henry is the man seems almost irrelevant. He is a fascinating guide to the world of the Southern railroads and the grim landscape of Reconstruction. But the real story, and the real John Henry, come to life after his death.